

VZCZCXRO6468
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHAS #0274/01 0811232
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 221232Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7217
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 3090
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 9217
RUEHNK/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 6709
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1893
RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO 0917
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 000274

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [SOCI](#) [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: ISLAMOFASHION: VEILED BODY, VEILED MIND?

¶1. SUMMARY: Less than a decade after a bloody civil war fought to keep Islamic extremists at bay, more Algerian women than ever are wearing the hijab (veil or headscarf). The phenomenon is only partly due to religion, as the hijab has become both a social trend as well as a tool Algerian women can use to gain access to public spaces in a society that has become more conservative and chauvinistic over the past ten years. In addition to offering protection from extremist scorn, it also facilitates entry to universities, to the workforce and to marriage, and in many ways has become the key to a good reputation and position within society. A recent survey revealed that 70 percent of Algerian women aged 18-49 now wear some form of the hijab. END SUMMARY.

¶2. The result is a low-intensity, daily battle between feminine independence and religious dogma being waged on the streets of Algeria's cities. While more and more women are veiled in some way than ever before, the hijab itself paradoxically has become an expression of individuality and non-conformity. Almost a century after the birth of Algeria's mass Islamist movements, the Algerian Islamist is a far cry from the 1970s caricature of short Afghan trousers, basketball sneakers, a false turban, beard, and a siwak stick between the teeth. This is true for women, as well: the traditional long black or grey hijab has slowly disappeared in favor of a less severe Islamic outfit -- often a long, trendy shirt and a pair of pants, sometimes even jeans. The phenomenon now also starts at an earlier age. It is not uncommon to see pre-adolescent girls covering their heads, although the plain white scarf of yesteryear has now been replaced by every color and pattern imaginable.

MORE CONSERVATIVE, NOT MORE RELIGIOUS

¶3. Sociologists agree that the veil is not always a religious commitment, but rather indicates a social trend. Louisa Ait Hamou, a professor at the University of Algiers and member of an active female advocacy network called Wassila, told us recently that today's hijab "has nothing to do with that big black bag women used to wear in the 90s" out of conviction or to hide their social condition. Without a traditional emphasis on concealing beauty and coquetry, the Algerian hijab of 2009 walks a fine line between maintaining its religious value and becoming chic and trendy. Sociologist Nacer Djabi explained that the changing hijab is a symbol "of the failure of the kind of radical Islam that used to prevail in Muslim societies, especially in Algeria." He noted that a society becoming more conservative was not the same as a society becoming more religious, a distinction he said Western observers often failed to make. Djabi gave the example of fathers or brothers who oblige their daughters and sisters to wear the veil simply to be more respected in both their neighborhoods and in society at large. In this sense, he said, "for the majority of young girls, the veil is a

passport to university and, later, to employment." Linda Bouadma, a journalist at Algerian Channel 3 television, told us that women, especially those from conservative backgrounds, are "using the hidjab to negotiate access to public spaces in a conservative and fiercely macho society."

A VEILED FRANCOPHONE HEROINE

¶4. Young Algerian women have a veiled role model all their own: TV star Khedidja Ben Gana, an anchorwoman for Al Jazeera satellite television who fled Algeria in 1994 when Islamic radicals threatened her life for not wearing the hidjab. She surprised everyone in 2004 when she decided to start wearing the veil, causing audiences across Algeria and the Arab world to buzz with discussion of "Khedidja's salmon-colored hidjab." Ben Gana scored a major success that same year when she interviewed French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin. Algerians viewed it as a delightful humiliation of their former colonial oppressor: a hard-hitting interview in perfect French by a veiled woman at a time when France was legislating against the veil.

ISLAMIC FASHION A BOOM INDUSTRY

¶5. A survey conducted by the NGO Center for Information and Documentation on the Rights of Women and Children (CIDDEF), with the support of the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation, revealed recently that the hidjab is becoming the outfit of choice in Algeria. A sample of women aged 18

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to 49 revealed that seven out of ten are wearing the hidjab. However, the survey points out that there are regional variations. Fewer women are wearing the hidjab in Algiers and the Kabylie region just to the east than elsewhere, with 65 percent of those who are not veiled living in the Kabylie region alone. It also showed that the full "Iranian veil" (the "djilbab" in Algeria) accounts for only two percent of the veiled population. The Syrian hidjab shop, Sajida ("Prostrate"), has become the pinnacle of Islamic fashion locally. Since opening its first store in Algiers in 2005, the brand has grown dramatically, opening a second shop in the capital and eight others around the country.

DIFFERING OPINIONS

¶6. Nearly ten years after a violent civil war fought against those who would impose the hidjab, more Algerian parents today are imposing it on their children. The irony is not lost on Fadela Chitour, a senior member of the Wassila network. Although she conceded the veil has become a passport for work, marriage and reputation, she added that "we certainly did not fight for veiling little girls in primary school." Sociologist Nacer Djabi points out that Algerian society has come to accept socially what it refused to accept religiously. Meriem, a law student shopping at a Sajida store in Algiers, told us, "There is no verse in the Qur'an that defines a particular concept of the hidjab. As you can see, I am veiled, but I am more elegant than many non-veiled girls." CIDDEF head Nadia Ait-Zai suggested that girls like Meriem are missing the point entirely with a false statement of independence: "When we start to veil little schoolgirls," she told us recently, "we are not veiling little faces -- we are veiling their minds."

PEARCE